

# Leading up to Christmas

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[0:00] So we're no longer in Jerusalem, down in the south, we're up in the north, in the wilds of Nazareth. The rabbis had a saying, can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Apparently it can. So here we're introduced to a virgin, pledged to be married to a man named Joseph.

And the virgin's name was Mary, so we're told her name's second. There's Joseph. He doesn't figure very much in this, except we're told that he's of royal descendants.

He's a descendant of David. So I think there's at least a legal situation there whereby his son would be of the royal family too.

And the angel, again I still don't know how to draw an angel, appears, was sent to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin, pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

[1:10] The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, greetings, you who are highly favoured. The Lord is with you. So again we have the word coming.

And Mary is greatly troubled about this and not surprisingly is rather anxious and fearful about it. But again the angel says, don't be afraid. You have found favour with God.

You are going to give birth to a son and give him the name Jesus. So once again we're in the realm of babies. And a lot is said here about the baby that's going to come.

But in particular that he will be a king. He will be called the son of the most high, verse 32. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David.

And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will never end. The Bible looks forward to the king like David.

[2:20] The Bible has this expectation that this king will be a forever king. And throughout the Old Testament, throughout the story of the royal family of David, it's always a puzzle.

How can this king be a forever king? Because all the kings are subject to death. They die and then the king is dead. Long live the king. Is that what the Bible means?

Because the Bible seems to mean more than that. And here the angel says, that's what this child will be. That's the nature of his kingdom.

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will never end. So that's a fantastic promise and statement, isn't it?

Now Mary herself has a question. How will this be since I'm a virgin? So I haven't had sexual relations with Joseph. And I'm not going to until I'm married.

[3:25] And the angel replies in this rather gentle and sensitive way. The Holy Spirit will come upon you.

The power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. So her question is answered in that way.

And the outcome, well the outcome is that she says, well the angel says nothing is impossible with God. And in contrast with Zechariah who queried and in his heart couldn't grasp what God was going to do.

Mary says this, I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said. And the angel leaves her. And here is another lesson I think from Luke as to the sort of response that fits in with God's purposes.

[4:32] And is the way God's story goes on. It's the response of submission to the Lord's word. May it be to me as you have said.

May it be in my life according to the word you have spoken. That's a deeply Christian response isn't it. May my life be imprinted with or if you like impregnated with whatever your word says.

And may what comes out of my life be a response. A willing submissive response to whatever you want to do in my life. Let's sing again.

So in this part Mary visits Elizabeth. She goes south to the hill country of Judea and enters the home of Mr. and Mrs. Zechariah and Elizabeth.

So there's Elizabeth. And Mary greets her. Mary comes and greets her. And it says.

[5:46] When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting. The babe leapt in her womb. So I don't know whether I've got a leaping. No. The babe leapt in her womb.

It's not an uncommon thing is it. For the woman to experience the child playing football inside her womb. Or whatever the child is trying to do. But in this case it's a very specific movement of the baby.

The babe leaps at the sound of the voice of Mary. Elizabeth herself is moved by the Holy Spirit to appreciate the power and significance of this meeting.

And the wonder of who it is that has just entered the room. In a loud voice she exclaimed. Blessed are you among women. Blessed is the child that you bear.

Why am I so favoured that the mother of my Lord should come? And although it looks like there's two people in the room. Seems pretty clear there are four people in the room.

[6:56] There's Elizabeth. And there's Mary. And there's John the Baptist there inside Elizabeth's womb. And there's Jesus the Lord inside the womb of Mary.

And here's the meeting of if you like of these four people. That as Mary comes Jesus comes. And as Elizabeth hears the greeting the baby.

And she, John the Baptist, leaps for joy at the coming of the Lord. And as he is in the womb of his mother.

And it's a great, there's a sort of exaltation about this encounter. Blessed, verse 45, is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished.

The mother of my Lord has come. And there is great blessing. So that's a wonderful scene, seems to me. Of even in the womb, these significant people sort of, as it were, meeting for the first time.

[8:14] And the joy and exaltation of that. And either there and then or in due course, Mary writes this poem.

It's said to be a song. I don't know whether she sang it. It doesn't say that it was sung. But it's certainly of a poetic nature. So this is her reflection on the situation that she finds herself in.

And it is a reflection of great joy. Verse 46. My soul glorifies the Lord. And my spirit rejoices in my Savior.

She's knocked out by the blessing that she has received to be so used by God. And she brings this back to the Lord in thanksgiving and praise.

And it's not a bad example for us to seek to emulate. The whole story is a story of blessing and grace.

[9:20] And for us, in our part, to say, we think this is great. My soul glorifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

It wouldn't be a bad response, would it? And she goes through with a catalogue of things that she has understood to be taking place.

With an insight given, we understand, by the Holy Spirit. It's not the first time a pregnant woman has written a song like this.

There are echoes of other remarkable births in the Old Testament. Not least, Hannah, the mother of Samuel.

A similar sort of song. But this one sort of caps the whole lot. For this is not a baby born to a woman in old age or a baby born to a barren woman.

[10:15] But this is a baby born to someone who has had no sexual relations with a man. This is a baby born of God. And she says, God has done great things for me.

And she says, in a way, God has turned the world upside down. And you can see references to highness and lowness. Verse 48, he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

Who am I? I'm just a girl who lives in a northern village. Probably doesn't have a posh accent. And God has chosen me. And God is going to do his work through me.

He's been mindful of the humble state of his servant. And everybody, well, everybody, down through the generations, people will still be talking about me. From now on, all generations will call me blessed.

For the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. Holiness is the particular quality that God has of being God. And here, Mary links it with this sort of activity of taking unremarkable people and blessing them and doing amazing things through them.

[11:32] And she says, that seems to epitomize the sort of unique character of this God. That's part of his holiness, if you like.

And she goes on to speak about turning the world upside down. Verse 51, he has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones. So she's envisaging emperors, rulers, powerful politicians, dictators.

And she says, these people are all taken down from their thrones. And what he has done is he's lifted up the humble. And I don't know who she has in mind here.

Perhaps people like her. People living in a little village here or a little village there. People that nobody has ever heard of. People who have no money, no power. And she sees him lifting these people up.

[12:35] And the hungry, verse 53, are filled with good things. But the rich in their penthouse with their multiple Mercedes, with their expensive handbags and accessories.

He says, these people, they've been sent away empty because of what God has done. And what God has done is focused in this baby.

It's a remarkable vision, isn't it? All she's got so far is that her tummy is getting a bit bigger. But she sees in this that God is turning the world upside down.

He's turning the world upside down. And she links it with the specific promises that we would say are part of the Old Testament. So she'd say the God who is turning the world upside down isn't just doing it in general.

But he's doing it specifically according to the program and the methodology and the specifications that he's put into the Old Testament of the Bible.

[13:51] Which makes the Old Testament a rather remarkable book. You know, if we really want to understand how God turns the world upside down, what he's aiming for, we should read that book.

It's quite a big book. He's fulfilling his ancient promises. And Mary takes it all the way back, not just to this one nation whom God has rather stubbornly decided that he will use to bring his Christ into the world.

But going right back to the beginning of that nation to Abraham and his descendants forever. God has remembered the promises that he gave to Abraham that through him all the nations of the world would be blessed.

All those years ago. And here, says Mary, as it were, feeling the lump inside her. Here's the fulfillment of all of that. It's in the baby Jesus. That's the baby.

And he's... Oh, I thought I had a king. No, maybe I didn't. It's a song of thanksgiving and praise for God's grace and his promise keeping.

[15:01] And we can sing her song in the version of verse number 628. This morning, we're not actually going to get to the birth of Jesus because Christmas is coming and it hasn't arrived yet.

But we will follow through the birth of John, the birth of John the Baptist. So there's Elizabeth. who gives birth to a baby.

So no longer inside her but a real live little baby comes into the world. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy and they shared her joy.

There's lots of joy in this story. Lots of joy. Lots of good news. They're going to circumcise the baby and give him the wrong name.

They're going to name him after his father but the angel specifically said he's to be called John which is what Elizabeth says. The relatives protest about this but Zechariah doesn't speak up.

[16:13] He writes down his name is John. And at that moment now he's got back into obeying what God has been saying.

He's able to speak. There's the amazed onlookers and he is able to speak. And we'll look at the thing that he says because he too writes a poem about his child.

The neighbors are filled with awe. Everyone hears this wonders about it. What is happening? What then is this child going to be?

For the Lord's hand was with him and everything is in motion but we don't quite know yet where it's all going to end up. But Zechariah filled with the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit is one of Luke's emphases.

He wants us to understand that the new covenant the New Testament is about having the Holy Spirit having God himself living within us by his Spirit. Praise be to the Lord the God of Israel because he has come and redeemed his people.

[17:27] So he is again looking forward to what God hasn't yet done because as we know the baby Jesus hasn't yet been born and nor has he done his life's work.

But on the basis of the birth of John the Baptist Zechariah looks forward and has as it were a vision of what God is doing what it's all about.

he's raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. Horn is a method of saying is a metaphor for strength.

Here is a powerful work of God. It's to do with King David. It's to do with his holy covenant. That's in verse 72.

He's promised this verse 70. we sang one of the songs of promise right at the very beginning. He promises to save us from our enemies to show mercy to our fathers verse 72 and to remember his holy covenant the oath he swore to our father David.

[18:41] And he's referring back to this commitment that God makes in words sealed with blood that he will not let his people forget him turn away from him be submerged in their sin and guilt he will rescue them from this and it's the vision that the Old Testament has all the way through but never manages to bring to fruition but here Zechariah says now God is actually going to do this he will have a people who can serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness they will serve without fear of enemies and the child this is John the Baptist you will be a prophet of the most high you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him and so indeed it was the

Lord came and we will see this as Luke goes on and we have this expectation of the Lord coming and who actually sets foot onto the stage it's Jesus in his grown up ministry he will go before the Lord you will prepare the way before the Lord verse 76 you will speak about forgiveness the knowledge of salvation and there will come the rising sun to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death I think that's a beautiful picture of darkness the darkness the shadow of death and in baby John and indeed baby Jesus excuse me

Zechariah sees the light is beginning to shine and the light that brings salvation forgiveness newness of life all the promises of God is just about to shine in its fullness through Jesus Christ and it's tender mercy he says which will lead our feet into the path of peace here's the description of the coming of Jesus and we'll have to wait 30 years for the next bits to I'm sorry the child grew and became strong in spirit and he begins his ministry presumably when he's 30 years old and that's when the rest of the action starts to take place but the birth of Jesus is coming and that will come we'll look at that next week so I'm sorry if you were expecting to hear about that this morning but you'll have to come along to the carols on 11 o'clock next Sunday morning or half past six next Sunday evening but Zechariah says where have we got to we've got here

God has kept his promise where were the promises they were embedded in this book in this book and you think why that book there's loads of holy books and the answer is well God chose to use that book that's the way God likes to work he's kept his promise and Zechariah should have believed shouldn't he because God has done everything that he said he would do it's a reminder to us to believe God to trust him if I had spoken to the children about faith I think I might have used examples of faith to have a relationship you need to trust somebody don't you so if mummy and daddy say don't eat that porridge until it's cooled down it's hot you'll burn your tongue and the child

says well I don't believe you in that and just eats it anyway they'll burn their tongue won't they if at some point mummy and daddy say

I don't know we're getting on this bus we're going to visit auntie and shore them we'll get on the bus and it'll take us to shore them and the child says I don't believe that runs off gets a bus to Lewis instead I mean the whole thing breaks down trust is so important in a relationship in a family relationship and this is how God works he wants us to trust him and we can use these promises and these stories to enable us to trust God for the future God kept his promises to Mary to Elizabeth to Zechariah and they could see perfectly well that that promise keeping was part of a big long promise keeping we can trust him too and he invites us to do that to live a life in which we trust what God says so here's some final conclusions and then we'll sing and then we'll have our shared meal together this bit of story that

[24:18] Ruth's read to us so so kindly this morning is part of a bigger longer older newer unfinished story because it hasn't finished its its course yet it will the story will only finish when Jesus comes back as he said he would to make all things new to finish this world and begin a new world and that will be if you like the beginning of the story then we've hardly got to the beginning of the story the story included Abraham and David and the kings and the prophetic promises and it goes on to speak not just of history but of what happens forever his kingdom will last forever and it's of the essence of God's speech to us that he invites us to be entwined in this story too that we can be characters in the story which

God is unfolding through Jesus Christ I wonder if you find that an attractive prospect I wonder if you'd like to be wrapped up in that as the story moves to its ending another feature of this is about the human need for rescue rescue from barrenness Elizabeth didn't have a baby from the decay of old age that's constantly with us as part of the human condition isn't it the enemies that oppress us freedom from those the guilt of sin that whether we whatever we try to do psychologically with it we're unsuccessful until God forgives us our sins fear to serve him without fear and of course ultimately to defeat death itself the last enemy to be defeated is death that's what this story is about it's about

God intervening with radical change first of all he enlarges the nature of this world so it's of the nature of married couples quite often have children but Elizabeth and Zechariah were too old but God sort of enlarged their youth if you like and gave them back what they used to have that God can also surpass the nature of this world so it is not in the nature of the human makeup that a woman can have a baby without a man but Mary has a baby without a man and it is God who in here in principle at least is turning world systems upside down and exercises his power and it's huge power to turn this world upside down he exercises this power not through bombs and armies and soldiers and violence but he exercises this power through remarkable gentleness as he comes to

Mary and says the power of the most high will overshadow you that's how this miracle will be done in gentleness and it's a story which calls people to faith in God's promises and if you're somebody who's thinking about being a Christian or wondering whether Christianity is for you or paddling on the edge one really good piece of advice is to get to know what God promises and the simple way to do that is to read the Bible and if that seems like a daunting thing to do get somebody to read it with you get somebody who will meet you once a week or so over a cup of coffee what should we read I don't know read Luke's gospel read Mark's gospel actually hear what God says so you know what he wants you to believe and of course the point of these stories is that the very centre of everything is this baby we haven't got to the bit where the baby is born yet but everything's been pointing to him hasn't it he's the one who will have the throne of his father

David he's the one that baby is meant to go before that is the point of having a John the Baptist that he can say look here's Jesus Jesus the baby king Jesus the baby Lord Jesus who as we shall see to our wonder and amazement comes to his throne through suffering Christmas is coming where we remember the birth of Jesus there is rich expectation and rich fulfillment in this baby but we're sort of playing tricks if we say Christmas hasn't yet come because the birth of Jesus has already happened don't have to wait till next week for that we don't have to we can fit into his story here and now by entering into faith in his promises like

[29:56] Zechariah should have done by submitting to his word as Mary did and seeing asking God for eyes to see that the centre of it all is this little weak human baby who is none other than the king of glory let's sing together a ending ending ending